

Author's note: I'm actually really proud of how this story ended up coming out, and it's probably one of my strongest oneshots yet. As always, read, review, and enjoy!

98B Diagon Alley, 23:28, Monday, November 17th, 2003

"Do we have a time of death?"

The green-robed Healer took a long time to reply. "Can't be certain," she finally said curtly, her practiced eyes scanning the mutilated corpse spread-eagled across the floor. "Not at least until I get him on the table."

The detective, wearing the dark robes of an Auror captain, rubbed his unshaven jaw. "Don't you have some sort of spell for this? To identify the exact moment when –"

"If he was killed by a Killing Curse or any other such Dark curse, Captain, of course I would," the Healer retorted, lighting the tip of her wand and gazing into the corpse's wide, unseeing eyes. "But in this case, I don't suspect that is the case. Give me a few minutes."

The captain scowled, but he turned to his partner, a lieutenant and shrugged. "She needs a minute."

"Good, 'cause we might as well get started on examining this place," the partner replied, drawing his wand. "Experimental Charms are on their way to check any protections he might have had in place, but I doubt they'll find much – if anything, the Anti-Apparition protections are still intact. But hell, there's no ID, no papers, nothing that would indicate anything about this guy or what he was doing, and even less about our goddamned killer!"

"You think this is the same fucker as last week?"

"A lot of the same signs are here," the partner replied steadily, stepping out of the tiny kitchen where the body had been found and moving into the sitting room. "The door was unlocked, but there's no sign of forced entry. No fragments or scuff marks that are particularly recognizable around the scene." The lieutenant scowled as he nudged the filthy floor mat with his dragonhide boot. "It's not

like we'd find one anyways, in this 'sty, but I suspect whoever did this covered his tracks."

"That's assuming a lot," the detective muttered. Drawing his own wand and muttering a few words, he brought his faintly-glowing wand tip close to the door handle. He frowned and rubbed his chin again. "Looks like the doorknobs were wiped with something – no traces of fingerprints at all... and look, there's even some droplets splattered just below the knob."

"Somebody's trying to cover his tracks," the lieutenant murmured, squatting to get a closer look. "What is that... never seen something glow like that under Scarpin's Revelaspell..."

"Revelaspell only gives you ingredients, this is different," the captain replied, his eyes narrowing as he moved his softly glowing wand down the frame of the door towards the floor. "There are small droplets on the door, but none on the mat... he probably Vanished any fluid that made contact with the mat and ignored what was still on the door."

"But he didn't Vanish the mat entirely," the lieutenant pointed out.

"Exactly." The detective straightened, and carefully eyed the rest of the doorframe. "See the splatters along the frame? He probably sprayed... well, whatever it was... and then Vanished the excess once it hit the mat. He didn't Vanish the mat entirely because its absence would be obvious, considering how filthy the floors are. But that sort of precise Vanishing is tricky, particularly considering if the liquid soaked into the mat, it'd be damn near impossible to Vanish without taking the dirt as well."

"So you're saying..."

"This person's talented," the detective finished, his scowl returning. "In other words, not our killer from last week. Or if he is, he's getting a lot better at it." He dimmed the light from his wand without a word and cursed. "Wonderful. Did you find anything in the bathroom?"

"Other than enough mould to recommend a few years worth of Scouring Charms?" the lieutenant replied, wrinkling his nose as he reached into his coat. "Just found this in the trash."

He pulled a clear plastic bag from his coat – inside it was a single, used-up tube of lipstick, coloured a shade darker than deep blood red.

The detective was unimpressed. "And?"

"Our mutual friend is the only one who lived in this shithole," the lieutenant continued, passing the bag to the detective and beginning to walk to a cheap and badly scratched bookcase. "No deviant behaviour evidenced in anything else in his apartment, no books beyond the expected stuff from this guy..."

"'Dark Magic and You: A Study'," the detective mused, scanning the cover of a worn, leather-bound volume shoved near the back of the shelf. "Sounds intriguing."

"But it's nothing extraordinary, anything displaying serious deviancy," the lieutenant retorted, waving the detective away from the shelf and into the tiny, even filthier bedroom. "The magazines don't suggest anything that bizarre –"

"'Mudbloods For You'," the detective noted, levitating the top magazine into the air to display a collection of nude women. "Charming."

"It's nothing extraordinary," the partner said impatiently.

"Except that all of this porn has been left in the open," the detective said sharply, "and that's unusual to say the least."

"Right," the lieutenant said with a nod, "but you could justify it if this guy was a loser that never got company and never got laid – which, given the state of things around here, is likely."

"But if so, why the lipstick?" the detective murmured, finally catching the train of thought as he lit his wand again to examine it closer. This time his wand glowed bright blue, but only for a few seconds. "Aha – we have fingerprints!"

"Fat lot of good that'll do us," the lieutenant replied, throwing an uneasy glance at where the Healer was kneeling, carefully trying to ignore the bloody puddle steadily growing across the floor from the ruined stumps that were once the man's arms.

The detective was unmoved, and pocketing the plastic bag, approached the Healer again.

"Do you have anything you can give us?"

"Other than the fact that he didn't die from blood loss or a curse?" the Healer replied irritably.

"Hopefully something beyond that."

"Then you might be in luck," the Healer said, rising to her feet. She was hardly five feet tall, but there was coiled energy in her every move, as if she was just waiting for the right second to pounce or strike. "Whatever severed this poor bastard's arms, it wasn't a spell – that I can tell you for certain."

"And you can tell us that how?"

The woman rolled her dark eyes, and her long braid nearly clipped the detective as she turned back towards the corpse. "Cutting Curses, or even Sectumsempra are distinct in that while they'll tear or cut flesh, they don't leave sizable impact wounds. There's very little bruising or contusion around the cuts – the spells either split the flesh open, or in the case of Sectumsempra, slice right through flesh as if it's not even there. But here..."

She bent and gingerly pointed towards the gaping, bloody stumps with her wand. "These wounds were caused by a weapon. Somebody hacked his arms clean off, and with enough force to split bone. I reckon either one or two blows did it, but it was enough of an impact to be very noticeable."

"Captain, there aren't any knives in the wooden block here," the lieutenant suddenly pointed out, gesturing towards a dark block with slots for cooking knives, big and small.

"You'd need a bigger knife than what would fit into that block, Lieutenant," the Healer retorted, looking down at the body. "But even still, it wasn't the blows or the blood loss that killed him."

"So you have a cause of death?"

The Healer glanced up at the detective. "You sure you want to know."

The detective only returned the Healer's stare with one of his own. "Look at me – you know I can handle this. I'm sure."

The Healer stared at the detective for a long few seconds before turning to the body. "Note the gaping mouth."

"I've noted it," the detective replied, crossing his arms over his chest. "It's almost chilling."

"I examined his mouth and cast a spell that traced anything that might have blocked his airway at some point," the Healer continued, taking an uneasy breath. "And... sir, from the contusions inside the throat, I suspect this man's airway was blocked in some way leading to his death."

The lieutenant looked a little sick, but the detective was unmoved. "Go on."

"I found traces of snake scales left in the same regions."

The detective wrinkled his nose. "That is disgusting. You're saying that... that this man was –"

"Choked to death by a serpent conjured down his throat, yes."

The lieutenant looked away hastily, but the detective only frowned. "Do you have any evidence suggesting what direction the serpent was moving, or whether or not its head was outside of the man's throat?"

The Healer paused. "I'm... not sure, I'll have to check –"

"You do that," the detective ordered, moving to where his partner was looking very sick.

"What a terrible way to die," he whispered. "I mean, fuck, at least the Killing Curse is quick..."

"Did you find anything else in the kitchen, or by any of the windows?" the detective interrupted curtly.

"I did find this," the lieutenant said quickly, reaching into his coat and pulling another clear plastic bag free, displaying a tiny twig with the unmistakable streamlined look of one belonging to a broomstick.

"There are no brooms in this flat, and I found this by the window. Could be worth taking a look."

"Good," the detective said, exhaling sharply. "At least with this and the lipstick, we might have a few leads."

"Sir?"

The detective looked back at the Healer. "Yes?"

"Small contusions around the inside of the larynx, indicative of a bite mark. The snake went in head-first."

The detective let out a hiss of frustration. "Fucking wonderful. Thanks."

He turned towards his partner. "I'm going to need to go to the Head of the Department on this one. Missing arms, throat-fucked to death by a snake, the Mudblood porn... if this guy wasn't a low-ranking Death Eater, I'll eat my wand."

"And that means –"

"You know damn well what it means. Public can't find out about this... the war's been over for five years! They trust we've been doing our jobs..."

The lieutenant immediately understood. "Where should we meet up?"

The detective thought quickly before pocketing his wand. "I'll pass the word to the Head that nothing gets to the Prophet until we're ready for a press release. You investigate the broom and hopefully I'll be done on time to meet you in the labs so we can get something on the lipstick."

The lieutenant shifted nervously. "And what are you going to do?"

The detective took a deep breath through gritted teeth. "I need to make a call."

19 Diagon Alley (Quality Quidditch Supplies) – 08:24, November 18th, 2003

The newest owner of Quality Quidditch Supplies was not a happy man when the lieutenant hammered on the door.

"We open at nine –"

"The warrant in my hands suggests otherwise," the lieutenant interrupted wryly, "but not to worry, Mr. Pucey, this should only take a few minutes of your time."

"Won't bring back my sleep," Adrian Pucey muttered, kicking the door open with his walking stick as he hobbled back towards the counter. "Haven't even had a cup of tea yet this morning – the pot's on, by the way, do you -"

"As I said, this'll only take a minute," the lieutenant replied wearily, rubbing his eyes. "I'll stop for something at the Leaky Cauldron on the way out."

"You look dead on your feet," Pucey said curtly, stepping around the counter and a neatly stacked pyramid of brand-new Quaffles. "But I suppose you know what you're doing – what can I do for you?"

"I need you to identify this twig we found at a crime scene," the lieutenant began, pulling the clear bag from his coat and setting it on the counter for Pucey to take a closer look. "It looks brand-new, and it didn't directly correlate with any brooms in our files –"

"It is brand-new," Pucey grunted, looking away from the twig without a second glance and pulling a heavy ledger from his desk. "Belongs to the new Firebolt model, the X2 Flamebolt. You can tell by the shaping of the twig – custom curved for aerodynamic perfection." The young man shook his head and shoved his fringe away from his eyes. "If I hadn't had that groin injury playing for Ballycastle, I'd have loved to take a spin on one of those."

"If it's a Firebolt, it's fiendishly expensive," the lieutenant reasoned, his eyes narrowing, "and you're the only one who gets those brooms in England, and since the company that makes them is based out of Manchester, it's likely not an import. Can you tell me who you sold them to?"

Pucey slammed shut his ledger with a sudden crack, his eyes wary. "Why?"

"Because I'm an Auror and it was found at the scene of a crime –"

"Doesn't mean that such information isn't a very valuable commodity," Pucey retorted, his eyes glinting with avarice.

"Particularly concerning professional teams – ask your partner about it sometime."

"You already know the players and teams that bought the brooms, and thus you already know the targets of my investigation," the lieutenant said evenly, crossing his arms over his chest. "So, when we get right down to it, the only thing you're doing here is making your life more difficult."

Pucey considered this, and then slowly, effortlessly, prised his ledger back open and scanned the columns, but the lieutenant could tell that Pucey was milking it for all he could. He knows who he sold those brooms to.

"Both were paid by mail-in forms through Gringotts," Pucey finally said, looking up and meeting the lieutenant's impatient expression. "Now, both were ordered anonymously, but given the conditions of professional Quidditch, where so much of the game is about the brooms these days, a tip is always passed to the reports and columnists – and to anyone who has a betting interest in the games."

"So, in other words, you know exactly who ordered the brooms," the lieutenant finished with a scowl. "Get to the point, Pucey."

"Puddlemere United and the Hollyhead Harpies," Pucey said smoothly, snapping his ledger closed and tucking it behind the desk. "One for the Keeper Oliver Wood, and the other for Chaser Daphne Greengrass."

"I thought Wood was out with a back injury from the tournament in Dover, why would Puddlemere be buying him one of the best new brooms on the market?" the lieutenant asked sharply. "And furthermore, why would you buy him a racing broom?"

Pucey clapped his hands. "Guess you have your case lined up for you."

Office of the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement,
10:04, Tuesday, November 18th, 2003

"And you didn't call me in last night?"

"Sir, I've been up with Healers and the Department of Experimental Charms for most of the night, and I barely caught four hours of sleep," the detective replied, taking a swig from his mug of scalding hot tea (liberally cut with goblin rye) and grimacing as he burned his tongue. "With the little evidence we have, it didn't make sense to bring things to you until we had a complete picture – and we still don't. My partner's still following leads in Diagon right now!"

"Until I start getting owls from reporters saying that they saw a 'commotion' surrounding an apartment building in the middle of the bloody night, and they want to get my statement!" the department head snapped, raking a hand through his thinning hair. "And then I look like a fool –"

"You haven't made any statements, right?" the captain interrupted intensely.

The older man snorted. "Of course I haven't, I know the political risks with a case like this. With Death Eaters getting offed –"

"He was low-ranking –"

"Doesn't mean shit in a time like this," the department head spat. "The peace we got is still uneasy, and there are still plenty of people who want Death Eaters dead. Most rational folk have moved on with their lives..."

"But who says the Prophet or the Ministry are filled with rational people, right?" the detective finished bitterly, taking another,

significantly smaller, sip of his tea. "And the wrong thing said at the wrong time –"

"And piece flies away like a Hippogriff in heat," the department head said with a scowl. "All right, you and your partner stay on this case, but we'll need answers and we'll need them fast. I'll need to pass things along to the Minister and the other interested parties, so keep things clean, all right? The faster we nab this fucker, the better."

The door cracked open, and the lieutenant stuck his head inside. "Sir, a moment?"

"You have more information about the case?" the department head asked curtly, gesturing for the lieutenant to come inside.

"Newest reports from the Healers have come in," the lieutenant replied, handing the detective and the department head a stack of papers. "And I just got back from the cosmetics counter in Twilfit & Taddings – fun times all around there, I can say."

"You should have picked something up for your wife while you were there," the detective said with a hint of a smirk, accepting the papers. "Given how late you came in last night. Wouldn't want her to make assumptions."

"She knows I was working, so shut up," the lieutenant retorted. "Anyways, the girls at the counter were able to identify the lipstick tube found at the scene of the crime. Turns out the lipstick is foreign, likely imported from France, 'cause they don't sell it over there. Definitely magical, according to them."

"Never thought I'd see the day that 'magical lipstick' caught on," the department head muttered.

"New millennium, new things happen," the lieutenant replied with a helpless shrug. "Anyways, the broom sales point towards two people that might have been at the scene."

"And neither Oliver Wood or Daphne Greengrass have known ties to high-ranking Death Eaters, outside of Draco Malfoy's marriage to Greengrass' younger sister Astoria," the detective finished with a scowl, flipping the page. "In other words, nothing directly connecting either of them to our victim."

"Except that a tube of exotic – and I'm assuming expensive – lipstick was found at the victim's house," the department head noted. "Do we have an ID on him yet?"

"Julius Gibbon," the lieutenant read, furrowing his brow. "Younger brother of a Death Eater who died in '97, probably was low-ranking himself – hard to tell these days... you know, I still don't see the connection. Greengrass' younger sister married a Death Eater – unless this was an inside job, which I don't buy for a damn second – why would she kill this one?"

"Maybe Malfoy borrowed the broom –"

"Malfoy's smarter than that, and far more politically minded," the detective said immediately. "He wouldn't risk breaking whatever peace we have."

"Okay, so what was Greengrass' motive, then?" the lieutenant demanded. "I can't see her lending a broom that good out to anyone – why would she want Gibbon dead?"

"Grudge, maybe," the detective mused. "Maybe the sex was bad."

"Witches like the Greengrasses don't sleep with just anyone."

"Tell that to her sister, she slept with Malfoy."

"What about Oliver Wood?" the department head spoke up, sternly cutting into the argument.

"We don't have much on him," the lieutenant admitted with a shrug, flipping to the next page in his stack. "Plays Quidditch for Puddlemere United, damn good Keeper – out with an injury, but yet his team just ordered him a brand-new racing broom."

"Probably has a grudge against Gibbon," the detective said with a snort. "I remember reading in the Prophet that Wood was drafted straight off the Gryffindor Quidditch team at Hogwarts, and Gibbon, being a Death Eater –"

"That's tenuous evidence and you know it," the department head said reprovingly. "You and your partner need statements from both

Greengrass and Wood, and do some digging too, see if you can pull anything interesting up. Anything else from this report that I should know before I call the Minister?"

"First results from the corpse analysis have come in," the lieutenant noted, flipping to the very back of his stack. "Nothing beyond what I assume my partner already told you... oh, this is interesting..."

"What?" the department head barked.

"Traces of venom were found around the wounds of our victim," the detective said softly. "And not just any venom either – Basilisk venom."

"That's a Class V Restricted Substance," the department head said, gritting his teeth against what the detective could assume from the man's expression was a splitting headache. "All right, I'll go down and talk to our people in Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, see if there's been a hit there. You two – I want this fucker caught before more people end up dead."

Puddlemere Pitch, Puddletown, Dorset – 11:49, Tuesday, November 18th, 2003

"You know this pitch was where the very first Quidditch World Cup was held?" the lieutenant said idly, pulling his coat more tightly around him as a chill gust of wind tugged at it.

"Of course I do," the detective replied. "Wasn't an English victory either, if I recall correctly."

"Didn't you use to play professional Quidditch?"

The detective sighed. "Yes. Yes I did. Long time ago." He glanced at his partner. "Thought you knew that."

"I did," the lieutenant replied defensively, "just figured, you know, you didn't want to talk about it because you never bring it up."

"You don't want to talk about your wife, but you bring her up at every opportunity –"

"Oh come on –"

"And then everyone has to hear you complain and complain and complain –"

The lieutenant reddened. "I get the point, thanks."

The detective, who had been grinning this whole time, shrugged. "Just giving you a hard time, man, no pressure. And speaking of giving a hard time..." he squinted, and held a hand above his eyes against the glaring sun cutting through the white sheen of clouds. "I think I might see our man on those benches over there. OY!"

The well-built Keeper snapped his eyes up at the shout, and immediately rose to his feet. But to the detective's surprise, Oliver Wood approached them both slowly, a very stern expression on his face.

"No press on the pitch, men, this is a private –"

"Do we look like the press to you, Wood?" the lieutenant said harshly. "Aurors, Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and we're actually here to speak to you."

Wood looked thoroughly unimpressed. "'Bout what?"

"The murder of Julius Gibbon," the detective replied coolly, studying the Quidditch player very carefully. "You know him?"

"I don't recognize the name," Wood replied curtly.

"Then maybe you can account for your whereabouts last night, say from between eight to midnight," the lieutenant spoke up, his hand sliding towards his wand. "Just so we can be sure, you know."

"I was out with old friends from Hogwarts," Wood said with a shrug. "Old teammates. They play for other teams now, but doesn't mean we can't get together for a chat."

"You typically go out on a Monday night?" the detective asked sharply. "Before a practice, nonetheless."

"We weren't drinking, if that's what you're asking."

"Can we get names of these teammates?" the lieutenant asked suspiciously.

"Angelina Johnson, Alicia Spinnet, Katie Bell," Wood said easily. "We were at the Leaky Cauldron, easily enough to find and confirm. Do you have any more questions? I'd like to get back to the plays for the game tomorrow."

"Just one," the detective said, raising a gloved hand. "May I see your broom?"

"Why?" Wood asked suspiciously, reflexively pulling it closer to him.

"Got something to hide?" the lieutenant asked, narrowing his eyes.

"No, I just don't want people tampering with it, that's all," Wood spat, glaring at the lieutenant as he carefully extended the beautifully lacquered and streamlined broom. "Don't touch, please."

The detective did not touch the X2 Flamebolt, instead scrutinizing it from every angle as he examined it. "You polished and cared for it this morning?"

"Always do, before practice," Wood replied with a nod. "You a Quidditch player, sir?"

"I was," the detective replied with a shrug. "Long time ago." He stepped back. "That should be all, my partner and I must return to London. Thank you for your time, Mr. Wood."

He turned and walked off the pitch, the lieutenant following quickly behind.

"Thoughts?"

"He's hiding something," the detective said, rubbing his jaw as he stepped off the field and beneath the stands. "But I'm not sure what – if his alibi checks out, we might have a bit of a problem. A man like him is easy to spot, particularly at the Leaky Cauldron."

"Definitely strong enough to cut off a limb –"

"But odds are Miss Greengrass, if she's a chaser for the Harpies, she is as well," the detective replied thoughtfully. "Let's get some lunch at the Leaky Cauldron where we can talk to Tom. From there, you can go to Hollyhead and see if Greengrass is at the pitch, and I'll go to the Greengrass Manor in Berkshire."

"And why the bloody hell would I want to go bloody Hollyhead?" the lieutenant exclaimed with disgust. "It's in Wales, for Merlin's sake!"

"One of us needs to go there," the detective said primly, adjusting his hat.

"But I don't want to go to fucking Wales!"

"Oh, I understand that," the detective replied with a private smile. "I wouldn't either. It truly is a wonderful thing to pull rank, it gets you out of so many unpleasant situations."

"Oh, fuck off."

Greengrass Manor, Berkshire, South East England – 13:13,
Tuesday, November 18th, 2003

He nearly missed the manor the first time.

He paused, and stepped to the side of the hedge lining the road, his eyes narrowing. A Muggle wouldn't have seen it, but there it was – the hidden, white gates of the Greengrass Manor. After his lunch at the Leaky Cauldron – where, to his disappointment and frustration, the bartender confirmed Wood's alibi – this was his last lead.

He drew his wand and tapped the cold steel twice – only for it to dissolve beneath his wand.

"You may approach," a chill voice echoed in his ears, gone so quickly that he couldn't quite discern where it came from, but he expected that – the Greengrasses had a reputation for shadows and misdirection, so much so that one would think they would be easy additions to the Death Eaters.

But no Greengrasses had ever worn a Dark Mark, because a nasty problem ran within the family, something that unfortunately rather

difficult to deal with throughout the years and that hindered both sides equally.

No Greengrass, male or female, could keep their mouths – or legs – shut.

The detective proceeded carefully down the garden path towards the impressive-looking stone manor house, keeping his eyes open for Venomous Tentaculas and other plants – the other thing the Greengrasses were well-known for. He spotted a few exotic flowers and vines and what looked like a small Boomslang lurking within the grass, but he paid them little attention. After all, he had a job to do.

His boots clunked heavily on the cobblestones as he approached the door and hammered twice on it. "Daphne Greengrass, this is the Ministry for Magic! We'd like to –"

The door slid open a crack. "Who did you say it was?"

"Ministry for Magic," the detective replied impatiently. "Miss Greengrass?"

"Who wants to know?"

"I'm an Auror, Miss Greengrass, would you like to see my credentials? I'm here to talk to you about the death of Julius Gibbon."

The door remained open a crack, but suddenly he could hear footsteps, quickening footsteps that were fading fast –

He shoved the door open, whipping his wand free and pointing it at the robed figure running towards the stairs –

"Stupefy!"

She spun on her heel, her dark blonde hair whipping in her face as she raised her own wand and deflected the curse with impressive speed. She slashed downwards.

"Glisseo!"

The detective felt the floor slicken beneath his feet, but despite his heavy overcoat, he was still just as agile as he'd always been. Adjusting his footing, he allowed himself to slid across the floor, adjusting his aim –

"Expelliarmus! Stupefy! Stupefy!"

"Protego! Parietis –"

Well, at least she's only throwing Shield Charms –

"ATRUM CHAIN LEVITAS!"

FUCK.

The detective dove, but he had no cover in the massive empty foyer, and the lightning bolts exploding from the witch's wand nearly hit him in the face, but thankfully the spell went high, and he only smelt singled hair and smouldering fabric where his hat once was. But his dive threw him off balance, and he skidded painfully into one of the stone pillars on the edge of the room.

That was a nice hat, damn it!

The witch had reached the stairs and was ascending them with surprising rapidity, but the detective wasn't nearly done yet. Scrambling to his feet, he slashed his wand viciously.

"Talea Effectus!"

The spell, a wispy blade of purple fire, scythed through the mahogany banister and nearly took the witch down in midstride, but it missed by a fraction. But it had slowed her down, and that was all the time the detective needed to regain his momentum – and deploy something the Department of Mysteries had finally declared was ready for active usage.

It was about the length of his forearm, when completely extended, the end slightly flared. A tiny coloured dial was mounted at its base, and he gave it a quick twist as he charged towards the stairs. She had almost reached the top and was running towards the nearest door –

He extended the rod and whispered, "Vercundus."

The rod kicked in his hand, and the blast – now lined with flames – exploded from the tip of the rod, splitting the banister in two and putting a flaming hole in the wall directly where the witch had just been standing. As he ran, he struggled to keep the rod aimed as it jerked in his hand again and again, growing warm beneath his hands as he headed towards the top of the stairs.

The witch reached the first door and slammed it shut – but the move was rendered precisely useless when the next blast from the rod blew the lock and doorknob clean off, sending the doors flying open. He could see her spin and raise her wand to counter his next blast –

"Supplanto!"

She deflected the blast with a Shield Charm – but the Trip Jinx knocked her feet out from under her, sending her tumbling to the carpet.

"Finite," the detective growled, breathing hard as he shoved the rod into his jacket and Summoned the witch's wand into his newly open hand, leaving her scrabbling helplessly on the rich navy carpet.

"So, Miss Greengrass, you want to start talking or should I arrest you right now?"

Wood cleared his throat slowly.

"We... we might have a problem."

"I expected problems, and I'm prepared for them. It's all part of the plan, Wood. Just like the blackboards – you understand plans."

"Not this one. They're onto us. And she'll cave – she'll say everything."

"I know that, Wood. That's the point."

Confusion filled the burly Keeper's eyes. "I don't understand. She's an ally –"

"Wrong. She's a tool, and a very good one. I have no illusions that she will serve her function admirably, and the campaign can continue."

Wood paused, and ran a hand through his short brown hair, his expression a mixture of confusion and raw shock. "You're saying –"

"You think I gave up as much as I did, went as far as I did, just to be thwarted like this, just because she's weak?"

And then Wood understood – finally – and he swallowed hard. "But... I've seen the way she looks at you. I've seen the way you look at her, and –"

"And what? That you can't understand why I did what I did, why I won her love and loyalty by showing my own, why I told her enough of the truth to know that she can never tell it, why I took her on her own invitation, and why when she dies, she'll die with my name on her lips and love in her heart?"

"It's simple, really. For every great endeavour, there is a cost that must be paid. She's my price – and best of all, I can pay it. After you've seen what I've seen, done what I've done... you can pay anything – even if it isn't yours to give."

"And make no mistake: she was mine."

Daphne Greengrass was an attractive young woman – most of the time.

Dark blonde hair, smoky eyes, lips that almost demanded a kiss, the toned body of a confident woman who took care of herself – most men had desired her courtship.

And then most men realized despite her beauty, she was all too willing to acquiesce – and move on, not caring an iota who she was with the day or night before. Listless, rudderless... Astoria's tendencies had been brought in line by discipline and her own ambition.

Daphne Greengrass just didn't care... or at least she didn't used to.

Now her makeup was smudged, her rich robes scorched, dirty, and long-wrinkled. Her eyes weren't blank or flat like before – now there was something beneath the surface.

And the detective saw it instantly.

"I won't tell you –"

"Don't even bother completing the sentence, Miss Greengrass," the detective replied curtly, gesturing with his wand for her to get to her feet, "because I know you'll talk."

"I want my –"

"You complete that sentence," the detective continued, glaring at the witch as he gave his wand a backwards twirl, causing the broken shards of the doorknob and lock to fly back into the door and instantly repair, "and more people will die."

"And how can you be so sure of that?"

"Because you know it, Miss Greengrass," the detective replied in a low voice. "So let's start with the basics – why were you running?"

To her credit – or at least whatever grudging admiration the detective was willing to give – the young woman said nothing, her lips pursed tightly together.

"Okay then," the detective continued coolly, "then maybe you can start with why you killed Julius Gibbon."

She froze, and the detective knew he had struck... well, not gold, but something.

"I'm sorry, who?"

There was genuine confusion in her voice – enough to make the detective pause for a moment of his own to consider his approach. Something didn't seem quite right...

"Julius Gibbon, Miss Greengrass. We found a tube of your lipstick at the scene of the murder, and a fragment that matches your broom."

The detective levelled his wand at the witch again. "Start explaining."

"I honestly don't know what you're talking about –"

"The pieces fit, Miss Greengrass," the detective continued, his eyes narrowing as he stepped closer and flicked his wand. "Incarcerous!"

The black cords erupted from the tip of his wand and snapped around her – quite appealingly, the detective noted. He stepped a little closer, and ran his hand along her slender jawline.

"Do I need to take the answers out of you, Miss Greengrass?"

She closed her eyes, and swallowed hard – but the flush of her face and the quickening of her breath said something very different to the detective.

Well, that's interesting.

"I didn't kill this Julius Gibbon... at least I don't think I did... I can't be sure, everything over the past few weeks have just blurred together... but he said he just wanted to fly again... just fly..."

"And who is he?" the detective asked quietly.

"You... you already know."

She blinked and trembled, and waited for the detective to say something, or caress her again...

"Finite."

The ropes vanished, and she stumbled, her eyes snapping open – to see the detective's back as he headed towards the door.

"Wait... wait! Where are you going?"

"To repair the damage my 'blasting rod' caused – whatever repairs that aren't to your satisfaction, you can bill to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement through the insurance partnership of your choice – and then track down the killer of Julius Gibbon before he kills again," the detective said primly, rapidly descending the stairs,

adjusting his coat, and pulling on his gloves. "And likely buy a new hat."

He paused, and met the confused witch's eyes for a moment. "You should really get some help. Potions, or St. Mungo's, but something."

Her expression was mingled confusion, anger, and... disappointment? "But... but I thought –"

The detective gave her a sad smile. "No. Never."

A few minutes later, after a few hushed mutters of Reparo, he was gone.

Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Ministry For Magic –
16:49, Tuesday, November 18th, 2003

The lieutenant was incredulous.

"So she wasn't responsible?"

"If she was, it wasn't of her own free will," the detective replied tiredly, taking a swig of his now stone-cold tea (the goblin rye was mostly still good, though). "But that girl is damaged – I can't see her killing anything, let alone the way Gibbon died. That sort of murder requires definite intent, it was meant to send a message."

"And you don't think it was an act?"

The detective snorted. "No. Not this time. Find out anything in Hollyhead?"

"Nothing there, and you know it," the lieutenant growled. "Have to explain to my wife why I was up in Wales, of all places today..."

The detective chuckled and downed the last of his tea. "What about from Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures? Anything come up on the Basilisk venom?"

"Nothing there either," the lieutenant replied with a stifled yawn, leaning back in his chair with frustration. "Nothing. You know, if Gibbon reportedly died from suffocation, why by Merlin's name

would the killer bother to coat whatever knife he was using with venom? It just doesn't make..."

"Wait."

The detective snapped forward, his expression suddenly intent. "Something doesn't make sense here... Basillisk venom is toxic to nearly all metals – it'll render them useless in seconds and corrode them to nothing in minutes. And we didn't find any trace of a weapon at the flat!"

The lieutenant frowned. "He could have just taken whatever he was using with him –"

"No, that's too risky, because if he misses a piece, he'd give us more evidence," the detective muttered, his mind blazing. "And besides, we saw that the cuts were clean hits – if a blade was corroding with Basillisk venom, a thin edge would be the first thing to go, and it would likely take a second hit to sever bone!"

"So you're suggesting..." the lieutenant's voice trailed off, and his face fell. "Oh no."

"Yes, goblin silver," the detective said, and it was clear the sinking feeling was filling his stomach as well at the very thought of dealing with the nasty little creatures that had only gotten more vindictive and uncooperative since the war, despite all of the Ministry's efforts.

"You're dealing with the goblins, it's your turn," the lieutenant immediately said. At the exasperated look from the detective, he raised his hands. "I went to Wales this afternoon, it's your turn."

But the detective was suddenly struck with a new thought. "But we... we might not have to deal with the goblins after all."

"And your reasoning for that is..."

"Weapons made entirely of goblin silver – and there's not many of them, not by a longshot," the detective began slowly, "are likely very old, and are likely classified as historical artefacts – and that means the Ministry might have records. Particularly of any big and heavy enough to be wielded with humans. In fact," he continued, his eyes

narrowing, "I can only think of one weapon of that size... and that just so happens to fall neatly into our case."

He rose to his feet and reached for his coat. "We need to get to Gringotts."

"So we're going to be dealing with goblins anyways."

"Not for long," the detective said grimly. "All we need is an answer to a question: if they are still in possession of the Sword of Gryffindor."

"And it'll have to wait."

The detective turned to see the department head approaching, a very grim expression on his face.

"I just got out of a meeting with the Minister and said 'other interested parties'," the department head said in a low voice, "and they are none too pleased about all of this."

"Well, so far, this is our only lead, sir," the detective reasoned, "and if we can get an answer here, you might have enough material to go to the press."

"Not good enough," the department head said, shaking his head. "I wish I had more time to give to you two boys, but matters have escalated beyond our control. "

"And that means what?" the lieutenant demanded. "Are you taking us off the case?"

"No, but it does mean we have to act on this," the department head replied, pulling an official-looking piece of paper from his leather briefcase and setting it on the table between him and the partners.

It only took them seconds to read it. It only took an instant for them to speak up.

"This is a trap," the detective said flatly.

"And we're the bait," the lieutenant spat, his eyes flickering with anger. "Sir, you can't be serious."

"This is a trap," the detective repeated, his voice getting a little louder.

"These orders are not mine and would never be mine," the department head replied quietly. "They're from above me, gentlemen. I'm very sorry – I would never ask you –"

"I'm sorry, I don't think you understood me, sir, this is a trap!" the detective snarled, shoving the paper off the table with a single violent motion. "We don't know how this killer strikes, what magic he or she knows, what he or she might look like, or what this plan or tip is based on –"

"I don't like this as much as you do, detective, but if we don't get answers here, authorities a lot higher than mine will not be pleased, and right now, believe me, we don't want that to happen." The department head set both palms on the desk and leaned forward. "I'm not asking for you two to do this – I couldn't that. It's your choice. But know this: if you're going in, you have full back-up."

"A full team?" the lieutenant asked hopefully.

"Better," the department head replied, snagging a coat and hat that suddenly appeared from behind him. "You'll have me."

19 Belsham Street, Hackney, Greater London – 22:00, Tuesday, November 18th, 2003

It was very dark in this part of Muggle London – and it was very cold. It wasn't snowing – not tonight – but the wind was biting and icy.

The detective pulled his coat tighter around his body as he stepped around the few automobiles still parked next to the decaying redbrick building.

"Now what?"

"I think we should find a way inside," the lieutenant muttered, drawing his wand. "Those doors look promising."

He pointed a gloved finger towards a set of white doors, set beneath another set of what looked like were once white windows. But the

windows were smeared with grime, barred, or boarded up, the flower boxes had fallen away to leave rusted metal spikes, and even the surrounding bricks were coated in filth.

Nothing about this street felt magical at all – or even very much alive.

The perfect place to hide.

"This is probably where he's hiding," the detective murmured, drawing his wand and slowly tracing it along the door. To his satisfaction, a muttered word brought a flash of blue to his wand. "And there are a few enchantments he's used to make this place more protected."

"We should call in back-up," the lieutenant said cautiously, dispelling an enchantment he identified with a slash of his wand a minute later. "I don't like the look of this place."

"We all have the Department of Mysteries' new blasting rods, no matter how temperamental they are," the department head said carefully, "but just in case, I'll send a Patronus for reinforcements."

"Good."

A few minutes later, the last of the enchantments collapsed, and the Aurors all drew their wands.

"On the count of three, we go in and sweep the building," the department head said quietly. "You two lead, I'll cover the rear. First sign of movement, cast to kill – I don't want any of us going like Gibbon did."

They nodded, and the detective took his position to the left side of the white doors, ducking beneath the large red-white sign advertising the tumbledown building for rent. He shivered for a moment, despite himself.

"One."

He steeled his gut, and aimed his wand at the door.

"Two."

He closed his eyes and took a long deep breath. This is it...

"Three!"

"Alohomora! Reducto!"

The magically reinforced lock shattered, and the crumbling door fell in after it. The detective was in first, his wand high as he carefully scanned the hallway, lighting his wand the second he stepped onto the floor inside. It might have been stone or tile at some point, but it had long ago been covered over by the filth of years of neglect.

"Move, move!"

They made their way down the hallway and into the main room. If there had been internal walls inside long ago, they had rotted away or had been torn down into one of the piles of debris now strewn haphazardly across the room. The few windows that were not boarded up let only meagre trails of light inside.

And one of those trails of light, casting a long line across the floor, revealed a pale delicate hand –

"We've got someone down!" the detective hissed, snapping his wand up as he began moving closer, keeping as low of a profile as he could as he crept between the cast-iron bars and broken furniture towards the still body he knew in his gut was a corpse –

"GET DOWN!"

He dropped flat immediately and rolled up into a crouch, as the wild curse went high and fizzled against the wall. He rolled, trying to spot the attacker in the shadows and find any sort of reliable cover. "We need backup – damn it, where are –"

"REDUCTO!"

The spell went wide again, but this time the detective could smell mouldy carpet burning, and he wrinkled his nose with disgust. It didn't look like the killer knew exactly where they were – a good sign, but they had to go on the offensive now or –

"INCENDIO!"

The armchair he was hiding behind exploded in flames, and he rolled back, darting in the shadows to another bit of cover. As he ran, he thought he spotted his partner hiding behind the desk, but he wasn't sure –

"AAAAHH! HELP! OH MY GOD –"

Even though he was easily twenty or thirty paces away, he could hear the bloody thwacking sound. This wasn't a gentle cut or even the sound of crunching bone – this was the brutal slash that cut through skin, muscle and bone like a hot knife through cheese, and a limb falling to the filth-encrusted floor.

He throttled his urge to shout as he began moving deftly through the darkness, all the while wondering where the flying fuck the department head had vanished to. He dimmed the light to his wand and pulled out of his blasting rod, knowing that he could overwhelm his opponent if he just got close enough –

"MERLIN! OH GOD! DON'T DO THIS, I HAVE A WIFE, I HAVE KIDS –"

And then came the voice the cut off his partner's voice in mid-shout.

"I'm doing them a favour."

The next sound was unrecognizable

The detective winced, but he could see the cloaked figure now, he could see where his partner's corpse was slumping towards the ground, the Sword of Gryffindor buried from tip to hilt in his partner's head, but he could see the cloaked figure whirling, his wand already rising...

"Vercundus – AVADA KEDAVRA!"

The cloaked figure somehow dodged – he seemed supernaturally fast, faster than any human had any right to be – obviously enchanted, but he could handle that –

"Talea Effectus!"

His blasting rod bucked in his hand as the blast went wide, but the purple fire hit the expected Shield Charm – and shattered it, tearing away the enchantments –

The rod shook in his hand, and though – somehow – the cloaked figure had conjured another Shield Charm, it was enough to drive him back a step – and knock his hood back. And in the dim flicker of light from the burning debris, the detective could see the young man's face.

Stubble on his chin. A long narrow nose. Slightly unkempt black hair.

Green eyes behind round glasses.

A lightning-shaped scar, barely visible but still there, on his forehead.

And in that moment, the detective knew what he had to do.

He threw back his left arm, his blasting rod flying from his hand as his sleeve dropped. His wand flicked upwards as if to cast another curse but instead a feint in order to call him –

And then...

His left arm was gone.

The blood came first. A sudden jet, coming from the stump where the arcing sword had come down to sever it. A cloud with the sword's passing – and then a torrent –

- and with it pain like he hadn't felt for years. His wand slipped from nerveless fingers as he screamed. It was the Cruciatus Curse all over again... he wanted to black out, to fall unconscious, to die –

And suddenly, the pain was muted. He didn't know how, he didn't understand it, but somehow it wasn't the only thing filling his mind. No, the only thing he could see was the young man approaching him – no, there were men, but one was familiar...

"Nice swing."

"I've swung a Beater's Bat before," the man who looked like Department Head Mulciber Sr. growled, as his face shook and

trembled as the Polyjuice Potion began to wear off. "Swords aren't much different."

"Take another dose of the potion after it finishes wearing off, we need to maintain your cover," the younger man replied, straightening his glasses and taking the sword from the half-transformed man. "At least for a few more days. Get ready to sound the alarm."

Oliver Wood nodded. "Okay... Harry."

The detective looked up. He knew his eyes were glassy... and if he was lucky, he had only a few more minutes to live, but he had to know... he had to know...

"You came back," he whispered, blood leaking between his teeth and dribbling over his lip.

Harry Potter sighed and effortlessly Summoned the dropped wands to his hand. "You honestly thought I wouldn't? People come back all the time, you know. And even though your kind killed my friends and my family, you didn't think I wasn't coming back to set things right, did you?"

The detective spat blood onto the floor and looked up at Harry Potter, and he saw the clarity in those green eyes – the frozen, bitter clarity. He knew that look – it had been in his own eyes for years... the look of a desperate, bitter man, who had nothing left to live for but justice...

"You killed Gibbon."

"Obviously, to send a message," Harry replied with a shrug. "And to get your attention. You and your partner were the best – though you two were obviously better at being Death Eaters than detectives."

"He... he does have a wife... and a little girl..." the detective murmured, struggling to keep upright the loss of equilibrium that came from missing a limb.

"And it's a damn shame I'll probably have to kill them too," Harry replied, tucking his wands into his pocket. "Probably best for us all that I don't let the consort and spawn of Alexander Yaxley live. But I don't need to worry about that with you, Antonin Dolohov – from

what Wood has read in the files that used to belong to Mr. Mulciber, your wife died over twenty years ago."

And just like it was yesterday, he could see her face. Framed with long fiery red hair and a hard, yet loving expression, he could see Regina just beyond his reach... just a little longer, darling... just a few more minutes and I'm there...

"Your wife died in an accident related to Ministry officials, and since you were so blinded by rage and grief, you sold out to Voldemort's first offer," Harry continued, almost blithely ignoring the man slumped on the ground. "And it was only when you were rotting in Azkaban that you realized what you had done in his service – and that you just didn't care anymore. Almost like when I realized I didn't care anymore... when they killed Ron when we were hiding on the Albanian border..."

He turned, and looked down at Dolohov. "I've been gone six long years since Voldemort took over – five years since the Order gave up and you got peace and stability under Voldemort's long thumb. You even became an Auror... that's cute."

"You... Wood –"

"Wood led you into a trap – he leant me his broom to kill Gibbon," Harry said calmly, twirling the ruby-encrusted sword lightly in his hand. "Easy to draw you in, with a broom like that – but then again, you played Quidditch yourself... and it's so easy to draw old fans back to the game..."

"Oh, and I left the lipstick behind to cut some damaged goods." Harry gestured to the darkness with a careless wave of his sword. "Some strings just needed to be cut."

"Daphne..." Dolohov slowly turned his head and nearly lost his balance, but he could see the pale hand – her hand... "You used her..."

"She was adrift, and looking for something to hold onto," Harry replied easily, giving the sword another experimental twirl. "Shame she grabbed hold of a shark – and she loved every moment of it, even as I fucked her senseless and killed her sensibly."

"You..."

"And to think I only needed her for the nest of Boomslangs in her yard," Harry mused to himself. "But I think I've said enough. You already know this sad little epithet that we can call your life has reached the last stanza.

"But you know," he continued, raising the sword, "you didn't take whatever you desired from Daphne... and you could have, you know, but you didn't. That shows..."

Harry's voice trailed off as he met Dolohov's eyes.

"We understand... each other," Harry whispered. "You and I."

"Aye..."

"And I've kept you from your wife long enough," Harry continued, reaching into his pocket and pulling out his wand. "And for that, I think I can grant you one last bit of dignity."

"You'll go... just ... like me..." Dolohov whispered.

Harry nodded. "I know. And I've come to terms with that. As have you."

There weren't any more words to be said and they both knew it. Dolohov simply bowed his head and closed his eyes, picturing Regina's sweet smile.

"Do it."

There was a flash of green, a rushing sound, and Antonin Dolohov slumped to the floor, dead.

Harry stared at the newest corpse for a long few seconds before tucking his wand in his jacket and giving the bloodstained sword an experimental twirl.

"Case... closed."